The “Family Black Sheep” Rotation Hypothesis

1. Central concept

The Family Black Sheep Rotation Hypothesis proposes that the role of the “black sheep” within a family may not be permanent. In certain families, this status functions as a relational and dynamic position, potentially shifting from one member to another when the family’s perception of who represents the greatest deviation from the group’s norms, expectations, or values changes.

The theory does not necessarily assume that the person occupying this role is objectively the one displaying the worst behavior. The fundamental element is the family’s perception.

2. The A → B → C model

Imagine a family consisting of three siblings: A, B, and C.

Phase 1 — A is the “black sheep”

A displays behaviors that the family considers inappropriate:

A → “Black sheep”

For a certain period, A is seen as:

• irresponsible;
• problematic;
• rebellious;
• different from the others;
• responsible for family conflicts.

B and C, by comparison, are considered relatively normal.

Phase 2 — B commits a greater transgression

Later, B engages in behavior that the family interprets as more serious or as more incompatible with its values.

The configuration may then change:

A → B

B becomes the main target of disapproval.

A may cease to be considered the main “black sheep” and may even be reinterpreted more favorably:

> “A had their problems, but B was much worse.”

Thus, A’s position within the family may undergo a form of relative rehabilitation.

Phase 3 — C becomes the new target

Later, C engages in behavior that the family considers even more deviant.

We then have:

A → B → C

C takes the position of principal “black sheep”.

3. The rotation can continue

The process does not have to end with C.

We may have:

A → B → C → A → B → C...

Or, in a larger family:

A → D → B → C → E → A...

The position can therefore circulate among different family members.

4. The importance of perception

This is one of the fundamental parts of the hypothesis.

The rotation does not necessarily depend on who objectively did the most serious thing.

It depends on whom the family considers, at that particular moment, to represent the greatest deviation from its norms.

For example:

A may engage in objectively more serious behavior than B, but the family may consider B’s behavior more intolerable because of its values, expectations, or personal relationships.

Therefore:

Objective severity ≠ perceived severity

And:

Perceived severity → potential change of the “black sheep”

5. Types of rotation

The hypothesis may predict different patterns.

Mobile black sheep

The role passes from one person to another:

A → B → C

Recurring black sheep

A loses the role but later regains it:

A → B → A

Circular black sheep

The role successively passes through several members:

A → B → C → A → B

Persistent black sheep

Despite new conflicts, a particular person remains the main target:

A → A → A

This would be important because it would make it possible to compare families in which rotation occurs with families in which persistent stigmatization occurs.

6. An important prediction of the hypothesis

The theory could make a particularly interesting prediction:

When a new member is perceived as more deviant, the probability increases that the previous member will cease to occupy the position of principal “black sheep”.

But this does not necessarily mean that the family begins to like the former target.

There may simply be a relative change:

> “We still do not like A’s behavior, but now B is the main problem.”